# The Unwritten Dance: Sisyphus in the Kitchen. Stories Forged in the Absurdism of Albert Camus

Michael McManus

Cover image: '*Brattish Son. Custard Fury'. Watercolour. Michael McManus, 2023.*

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For Jim Duffy an allotment neighbour and a fine, principled man.

## Not every song deserves a dance

*Michael McManus*

I won't move to the rhythm you set,
My feet know a different path.
You play your song with sharpened notes,
But I have learned to walk in silence.

Your hands conduct the air around me,
Pulling, twisting, demanding steps.
Yet I stand still, unshaken,
A statue carved from my own will.

The music fades, your voice dissolves,
And I remain, unchained, whole.
Not every beat commands a dancer,
Not every song deserves a dance.

# Table of Contents


| | Page |
|---|---|
| **Introduction** | **1** |
| **Part 1** | |
| **Absurdity in the Everyday** | **11** |
| **Custard Fury: Absurdity as Trivial Outrage** | **16** |
| **Forty-Seven Peas: Absurdity as Human Need** | **19** |
| **The Cartographer of Depths: Absurdity as Revelation** | **26** |
| **The Persistence: Absurdity as Artistic Revolt** | **31** |

## Part 2

**Decency in an Indifferent Universe** 33

**The Crucifix: Decency as a Gift** 38

**The Ward: Decency as Labour** 46

**The Surgeon's Hands:**
**Decency as Craft** 51

**The Harbour Man:**
**Decency as Burden and Boundary** 59

## Part 3

**Autonomy, Rebellion, and**
**The Refusal to Dance** 65

**Not every song deserves a dance:**
**Rebellion as Authenticity** 69

**The Crown of Me: Rebellion**
**as Self-definition** 76

**The Other Side: Rebellion as Authenticity** 82

**Part 4.**

**Work, Duty, and the Weight We Carry** 88

**Ten Miles with the Key: Work as Identity and Illusion** 92

**Afterword: The Silence and the Answer** 99

# Introduction

There are moments in life when the world feels strangely misaligned; not catastrophic, not dramatic, simply out of joint. A conversation that falters. A task repeated without reward. A gesture of kindness that arrives for no reason the universe can justify. These moments are small, almost invisible, yet they reveal something essential about the human condition: we live in a world that does not explain itself, and we keep trying to live as though it should.

Albert Camus called this tension **the absurd**: the collision between our hunger for meaning and the universe's magnificent indifference. But Camus never meant this as a diagnosis of despair. For him, the absurd was a starting point, not an ending. Once illusions fall away, what remains is the clarity of being alive: the sun on a wall, the weight of a task, the presence of another person, the stubborn pulse of one's own freedom. This book is written in that spirit.

The stories that follow are not parables in the strict sense, nor are they philosophical arguments disguised as fiction. They are encounters - with kitchens, wards, workshops, cafés, and the quiet rooms where people make decisions that no one else will ever see. They explore the absurd not as a grand existential crisis but as something woven into the fabric of daily life. A pot of custard. A paper crown. A melting clock. A crucifix wrapped in blue cloth. A key carried ten miles by mistake.

Each story asks a simple question: **How do we live honestly in a world that does not answer us?**

Some characters respond with humour, some with decency, some with rebellion, some with work, and some by projecting meaning onto the objects they carry. None of them escape the absurd. But all of them, in their own ways, refuse to be diminished by it. Camus wrote that "the struggle itself… is enough to fill a man's heart." These stories are about that struggle; not heroic, not tragic, but human. They are about the small acts of attention, defiance, and care that give shape to our days. They are about the dignity of continuing, even when continuation is the only thing left.

If the universe is silent, then meaning is something we make together; in kitchens, in corridors, in conversations, in the brief moments when one person notices another. These pages are an attempt to honour that work.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus's famous claim is that the only serious philosophical question is whether life is worth living; everything else is secondary. He defines the "absurd" as the collision between humanity's hunger for meaning, clarity, and unity, and a universe that offers none of these things. Crucially, Camus rejects suicide and what he calls "philosophical suicide" (turning to religion or abstract systems to escape the absurd) as false solutions. Instead, he proposes revolt: living fully and consciously within the absurd, without illusions. The essay's closing image, Sisyphus eternally rolling his boulder up the mountain, only to watch it roll back down, becomes Camus's model for human existence. He argues that in the moment Sisyphus walks back down to begin again, fully aware of his fate yet refusing despair, he becomes happy. The struggle itself, embraced lucidly, is enough.
*The Stranger* (1942) is often considered the literary companion to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, this novel follows Meursault, an Algerian clerk whose emotional detachment - famously, his indifference at his mother's funeral - sets the tone for the entire narrative. After he kills a man on a beach in a moment of heat-induced

confusion, his trial becomes less about the killing itself and more about society's discomfort with his refusal to perform expected emotions or remorse. The novel's power lies in its flat, unadorned prose style, which mirrors Meursault's worldview: events simply happen, one after another, without cosmic significance. In the novel's final pages, facing execution, Meursault arrives at a kind of peace; an acceptance of the universe's indifference that becomes, paradoxically, liberating. *The Plague* (1947) is set in the Algerian city of Oran during a fictional bubonic plague outbreak, this novel functions on multiple levels - as a literal account of epidemic and quarantine, and as an allegory (widely read as referencing the Nazi occupation of France). The narrator, Dr. Rieux, and other characters respond to the plague not with grand heroism but with quiet, unglamorous persistence: treating patients, organizing sanitation squads, simply continuing the work despite overwhelming odds and inevitable losses. The novel marks a shift in Camus's thinking, from the solitary absurdism of Sisyphus toward questions of solidarity, community, and ethical action in the face of meaningless suffering. The characters don't defeat the

plague through faith or philosophy; they resist through ordinary, repeated acts of decency. *The Rebel* (1951) extends Camus's exploration of revolt from the individual to the political and historical sphere. He examines revolutions and rebellions throughout history; including the French Revolution and various 20th-century movements and askes when rebellion against injustice tips into tyranny itself. Camus draws a crucial distinction between rebellion (which affirms certain limits and values even while resisting oppression) and revolution (which, in his view, often becomes totalitarian by claiming to justify any means toward an ideological end). This book famously caused a rupture with Jean-Paul Sartre and other left-wing intellectuals, who saw Camus's critique of revolutionary violence, particularly regarding Soviet communism, as a betrayal of progressive politics. *The Rebel* argues for a kind of moral moderation: resistance to injustice that doesn't itself become unjust.

Several threads connect these works. First, the absurd, not as nihilism but as a starting point for honest engagement with existence. Second, revolt, not violent rebellion necessarily, but a refusal to accept either despair or false comfort. Third, an emphasis on the body, the senses, and the physical world (sunlight, sea, heat) as sources of value in the absence of transcendent meaning - reflecting Camus's Algerian, Mediterranean background. Fourth, an ethics of limits: Camus consistently distrusts ideologies and systems that demand the sacrifice of present human lives for abstract future goals, whether religious or political.

Camus died in a car accident in 1960, age 46, having won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. His work occupies an unusual position; often shelved alongside existentialism, though he himself rejected that label, preferring to be understood as a philosopher of the absurd and of limits. His insistence on lucidity, solidarity, and modest human dignity in the face of an indifferent universe has kept his work resonant well beyond its mid-20th-century context, particularly *The Stranger* and *The Plague,* both frequently revisited during moments of social crisis.

A fascinating comparison, exists between Absurdity as humour and Absurdity as Camus saw it. The two uses of "absurd" share a common root but pull in very different directions. Both begin from the same basic perception: a mismatch, an incongruity, a collision between expectation and reality. Something doesn't fit where it should. A custard pie hits a dignitary. A boulder rolls back down. In both cases, the logic of the world breaks down momentarily.

They diverge in comic absurdism; Monty Python, Spike Milligan, Edward Lear. The mismatch is the punchline. The collision between expectation and reality produces laughter, a release of tension. It's pleasurable precisely because it's safe; we observe the incongruity from a distance and laugh at its silliness. The chaos is contained, playful, harmless.

In Camus, the mismatch is existential and inescapable. There is no punchline, no relief, no stepping outside it. We are inside the incongruity permanently; humans who crave meaning, trapped in a universe that offers none. Rather than laughter, it demands a response: revolt, freedom, and passion.

There is an interesting overlap. Comic absurdism, of which I am very fond, often smuggles in genuine unease. Beckett's Waiting for Godot is both hilarious and devastating - two men waiting forever for someone who never comes. That double register, funny and terrifying simultaneously, is where Camusian and comic absurdism genuinely meet. This actually connects interestingly to my story, "Custard Fury" - the custard pie is a comic absurdist image, yet I gave it philosophical weight. That tension between the silly and the serious is itself very Camusian.

# PART 1
# ABSURDITY IN THE EVERYDAY

Everyday life is where the absurd hides most convincingly. Not in grand tragedies or cosmic revelations, but in kitchens, cafés, waiting rooms, and overheard conversations; the small, unremarkable spaces where human expectation quietly collides with the world's indifference. Camus reminds us that the absurd is not an exotic condition; it is the natural friction between our longing for coherence and the universe's refusal to provide it.

These stories explore that friction through the ordinary: a pot of custard, a dropped ice cream, a stranger's monologue about peas, a painter confronting his own melting clocks. Each piece reveals how the absurd is woven into the texture of daily life, sometimes comic, sometimes unsettling, always illuminating.

Here the stories are arranged where the world's indifference is encountered not as catastrophe but as inconvenience, humour, or quiet revelation; the moments when life shows its seams:

*Custard Fury: Absurdity as Trivial Outrage*

A kitchen dispute becomes a miniature theatre of the absurd, where a man's disproportionate outrage; "a man barricaded behind the brattishness of someone who had never fully left the age of seven"; exposes the ego's hunger for significance. The custard, indifferent and thickening at its own pace, becomes the silent antagonist to his self-importance. This story shows how trivial frustrations often reveal deeper existential misalignments.

*Forty-Seven Peas: Absurdity as Human Need*

A stranger recounts a disappointing meal with forensic intensity, counting "forty-seven peas" as though the universe might answer for the insult. His monologue is both ridiculous and strangely moving, a reminder that humans cling to meaning even in the smallest injustices. The absurd here is gentle: a portrait of how people carry their private storms into the world.

*The Cartographer of Depths: Absurdity as Revelation*

Marcel's lifelong habit of overthinking collapses when a child drops an ice cream and laughs; a moment too immediate to analyse. His realisation that "everything is given" marks a shift from mapping meaning to inhabiting experience. This story captures the absurd as a kind of liberation: the world does not need to be decoded to be lived.

*The Persistence: Absurdity as Artistic Revolt*

Dalí confronts his own melting clocks and discovers that they are not symbols of hidden meaning but expressions of time's indifference. His decision to "answer that silence with colour" reframes artistic creation as a joyful revolt. Here, the absurd becomes luminous; a spectacle rather than a burden.

This section establishes the philosophical foundation for the book. By beginning with the absurd in its most familiar, domestic, and comic forms, I prepare the reader to encounter the deeper ethical and existential questions explored in later clusters. The movement is deliberate.

Together, the stories form a gentle descent into the Camusian landscape: the world is indifferent, but it is also vivid, strange, and sometimes very funny.

## Custard Fury: Absurdity as Trivial Outrage

The kitchen was warm in the way that kitchens get in the late afternoon; a thick, close warmth that had nothing to do with comfort and everything to do with something brewing. The windows had steamed at their edges. A pot simmered on the hob.

He came in the way he always came in: filling the doorway first with his presence, then with his grievance. His face was already red, the particular crimson of a man who had decided, somewhere between the stairs and the kitchen, that he had been wronged. He settled into his chair with the theatrical weight of the deeply aggrieved, cushioned by his own indulgence, certain of his suffering.

"Mother."

The word wasn't a greeting. It was a summons.

She turned from the hob, spoon in hand, and met his eyes without flinching. She had been stirring the custard for several minutes with the steady, practiced motion of someone who understood that good things require patience and cannot be rushed by fury.

"This custard," he announced, as though delivering a verdict long overdue, "is too dense. It's lumpy. It's an egregious flaw; a culinary transgression of the highest order." He said it with the conviction of a man who believed the universe owed him smoothness in all things. His mother looked at him for a moment. Then she looked at the custard. Then, quietly, she returned to her stirring. "It's meant to be thick," she said. Her voice was even, almost gentle, the voice of tempered reason in the middle of a storm that didn't deserve the name. "Not thin and watery like the sort they sell in cartons at the supermarket. This is textured. This is made properly. It's a mark of artistry, if you'd only look at it."

But he wasn't looking at it. He was locked inside his own redness, his scowl etched deep, his stance unyielding; a man barricaded behind the brattishness of someone who had never fully left the age of seven. His fury was total and entirely self-regarding. It had no interest in custard, really. It had interest only in itself.

And the custard, for its part, was indifferent. It simmered on, untouched by the drama unfolding around it, innocent of all charges, doing precisely what custard does when left in the care of someone who knows what they're about.

This, in the end, was the allegory: a kitchen, a pot, a man performing outrage over something that did not merit it; a drama of trivia elevated to tragedy by ego alone. Yet in its smallness, it mirrored something much larger. The world is full of men who rage at the thickness of custard while their mothers stand quietly stirring, holding the chaos together with a practiced hand and a refusal to be moved.

The custard set. The man simmered. The kitchen held them both, warm and unbothered, as kitchens have always done; witnesses to the serious business of insignificant things, where life's real texture is made, lump by lump, in the ordinary pot of everyday.

## Forty-Seven Peas: Absurdity as Human Need

The afternoon had the quality of a held breath. I had arranged myself in the garden seat with the deliberate care of a man who has earned his idleness; book open but unread on my knee, the sun doing what sun does without apology or explanation. The street beyond my gate moved at its Sunday pace: a woman with a dog, two boys on bicycles, the slow drift of a plastic bag in the warm air. I watched all of it with the pleasant vacancy of a man thinking about nothing, which is to say, thinking about everything and calling it nothing. I was, without knowing the word for it, content.

He appeared at the far end of the street like a figure from another era, which in certain respects he was. The trousers were the first thing. They had migrated, as trousers do in the fullness of years, to a latitude somewhere between the navel and the sternum, held in defiant position by a pair of braces the colour of old mustard. He walked with the unhurried authority of a man who had long since stopped caring what the universe thought of his pace, which I recognised; even then, before he had spoken a word; as a kind of wisdom, or at least a reasonable facsimile of it.

I watched him approach with the mild, unfocused interest one reserves for passing clouds. He stopped at my gate. He turned and looked at me with eyes that contained; there is no other word for it; *mischief*. As though he had caught me at something. As though we shared a joke whose punchline had not yet arrived. He opened his mouth. What followed was, by any measure, a monologue of rare and terrible completeness.

The restaurant had been called, he said, *La Petite Maison*, though there was nothing petite about the portions, or the prices, or his feelings on the matter. The amuse-bouche had arrived on a slate; *a slate, I ask you, not a plate, a piece of actual quarried rock* and had consisted of something foam-based, which he described with the grim precision of a coroner.

The starter: adequately received, though the dressing had been enthusiastic to the point of aggression. The bread: *good*. This was offered as a concession. The steak; and here his hands rose to conduct an invisible orchestra, the steak had arrived at a temperature he could only describe as *aspirationally* medium-rare. He had sent it back. The second attempt had overcorrected. He had eaten it anyway, under protest, with the stoic resignation of a man who has made peace with an imperfect universe on the specific grounds that he has not yet made peace with an imperfect kitchen. The peas; *forty-seven of them, he had counted*, were fine.

The rice pudding had been measured, he estimated, at roughly two hundred and thirty millilitres, which he illustrated with a cupped hand. He had wanted two-fifty. He had not said so at the time. He was saying so now, to me, in my garden, on a Sunday afternoon, on a street in which otherwise nothing of consequence was occurring. I nodded. I had been nodding for some time. My neck had developed an opinion about this.

And then; with the abruptness of a full stop placed without warning at the end of a very long sentence; he stopped. Let out a breath. A satisfied exhalation, as though he had set down something heavy and was grateful for the release of it. I opened my mouth. I had a word ready. Possibly two. He turned and walked away. Not rudely, exactly. Not with any awareness that a transaction had remained incomplete. He simply resumed his stroll as though our encounter had been precisely what it needed to be; a meal tasted, described, and filed. He did not look back.

I sat with it for a moment. *For goodness sake*, I thought. *Get a life.*

And then, because the afternoon was still there; unchanged, entirely indifferent to the gastronomic soliloquy that had briefly passed through it, I laughed. Not unkindly. At the whole thing.

Here was a man who had dined, alone or otherwise, in a restaurant that had failed him in several measurable respects. He had felt things; irritation, mild pleasure, the specific injustice of a steak returned twice. He had counted his peas. He had wanted two-fifty millilitres of pudding and received two-thirty. And then he had carried all of it down a Sunday street and delivered it, without preamble or conclusion or any apparent need for response, to a stranger in a garden. The question that arrived, unhurried, in the warm air was this: *was that so different from anything else?*

Camus had written; I had read it years ago, underlined it, half-forgotten it, that the absurd is born of the confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. We carry our tallies and our grievances and our counted peas out into an afternoon that has no interest in receiving them. We speak. The universe continues its leisurely stroll. We are not answered.

The man with the high trousers had not been answered either. He hadn't seemed to need it. He had simply *spoken*. Had given his account. Had, in his way, existed with a completeness I found; sitting there, book unread, sun unchanged, quietly magnificent. Perhaps *get a life* was the wrong instruction. Perhaps the instruction was *live the one you have*, fully and without self-consciousness, all the way down to the volume of the rice pudding, which matters because *you* are there eating it, and you are briefly, improbably, and without sufficient explanation, *here*.

I settled back into my seat. The street resumed its nothingness. The sun continued its long, indifferent arc.

Somewhere down the road, I imagined, a man in high trousers was already composing tomorrow's monologue. A breakfast, perhaps. A contested egg. I found I was looking forward to it.

## The Cartographer of Depths: Absurdity as Revelation

Marcel had mapped everything. Not in the literal sense; though his flat in Lyon did contain seventeen hand-drawn diagrams of philosophical arguments, colour-coded by logical validity. No, Marcel had mapped *meaning*. Or rather, he had spent the better part of forty-three years attempting to, which is a different thing entirely, and the difference mattered enormously to him, which was itself part of the problem.

He sat now at his usual table outside Café Soleil, an espresso growing cold at his elbow, a notebook open before him. The page was blank. He had been staring at it for an hour, not from lack of thought, but from an excess of it. Before he could write a single sentence, he needed to resolve whether language was adequate to the task. Before he could resolve *that*, he needed to settle the prior question of whether the task was worth undertaking.

And before *that*; "Your coffee," said the waitress, Adèle, nodding at his cup with mild reproach. She was perhaps twenty-two. She had flour on her wrist from the kitchen and was already walking away. Marcel watched her go. She hadn't paused. Hadn't weighed the utterance. The words had simply arrived, offered themselves to the world, and departed. He found this quietly astonishing.

It had been his oldest friend, Thierry, who had said it plainly over dinner the previous Thursday.
*"You are over-ponderous, Marcel. You know this."*
He had said it without cruelty, refilling Marcel's wine glass with the easy generosity of a man untroubled by the metaphysics of hospitality. Marcel had objected, naturally. He had explained, at considerable length, that depth of thought was not a flaw but a duty, that to live without rigorous examination was to sleepwalk through existence, to be complicit in one's own superficiality. Thierry had listened. Then he had said, *"The walnut tart is good tonight."* Marcel had found this infuriating. He had also, reluctantly, eaten two slices.

The trouble; and Marcel could see this, because his self-awareness was, if anything, *also* over-ponderous, was that he had read Camus at twenty and understood the Absurd intellectually, immediately, with the clean precision of a mathematician grasping a proof. He understood that meaning was not hidden in the depths, waiting to be excavated by sufficient thought. He understood that existence preceded essence, that the universe offered no answers because the universe was not, in fact, asking the same questions he was. He understood that Sisyphus must be imagined happy not because the boulder relents, but because the *man* does not. He had understood all of this. He had then spent two decades thinking *about* it rather than *through* it, which Camus, he suspected, would have found both understandable and faintly comic.

A child at the next table dropped an ice cream. It hit the pavement with a soft, definitive splat. The child stared at it. Then the child looked up at her grandmother, and laughed; sudden, ungoverned, entirely disproportionate to the situation - which is precisely the nature of real laughter.

Marcel watched. He did not analyse the laughter. It happened too quickly. It arrived before the question could form, before his mind could open its cartographer's kit and begin surveying the terrain. The sound simply *entered him*; small, bright, brief and was gone. And in the space it left, he noticed he was sitting in sunlight. The plane trees lining the street were moving. Somewhere nearby, someone was playing a radio, something with an accordion, cheerful and slightly out of tune. The coffee, cold now, still smelled like coffee. He had not chosen these things. They had simply occurred, with the same magnificent indifference as everything else in an indifferent universe.

*The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given.*

He had underlined that sentence at twenty. He was only now, at forty-three, beginning to understand that *given* was the operative word. Not earned. Not decoded. Not reached through seventeen colour-coded diagrams. *Given.*

He closed the notebook. He did not close it because he had resolved anything; the great questions remained magnificently unresolved, as they always had, as they always would. He closed it because Adèle was passing again, and he wanted another coffee, this time drunk while it was still warm, and he wanted to sit with the accordion and the moving trees and the residual ghost of a child's laughter, not as *symbols of something*, but simply as themselves.

He raised his hand. She saw him. She nodded.
It was, he thought, an extraordinarily small moment. It contained no answers whatsoever. He found, to his surprise, that this was enough.

## The Persistence: Absurdity as Artistic Revolt

Salvador woke to find the clocks had not stopped; they had simply given up pretending. Each face drooped over its table edge like cheese left in the Catalan sun, and he understood at once that this was not surrealism. This was honesty.

He had spent years painting the dream-logic of Freud, the melting watches of subconscious desire, convinced he was excavating hidden meaning from the rubble of the mind. But standing now before his own canvas in the white morning light, he saw it plainly: there was no hidden meaning. The watches melted not because the unconscious willed it, but because time itself was indifferent; stretched, sagging, absurd, asking nothing of anyone. "I have been searching for symbols," he said aloud to the empty studio, "when there was only the rock."

He thought of the boulder he must push; not up a mountain in Greece, but up the canvas itself, each morning, the same gesture: brush to paint, paint to surface, surface to nothing. Tomorrow he would do it again. The ants crawling across his golden watch were not omens of decay. They were simply ants, doing what ants do, in a world that had not asked them to mean anything.

And yet; he smiled, moustache twitching, there was a strange joy in it. If the world would not provide meaning, he would provide spectacle. He would paint with such ferocious, lucid attention that the absurdity itself became luminous. Let the watches melt. Let the elephants walk on spider legs. Let the world remain silent; he would answer that silence with colour, with extravagance, with his own ridiculous, magnificent persistence.

He picked up his brush. Outside, Port Lligat's sea glittered, vast and unbothered. Salvador Dalí began again, happily, at the bottom of the hill.

# PART 2

# DECENCY IN AN INDIFFERENT UNIVERSE

If the absurd reveals the universe's indifference, then decency reveals humanity's answer to it. Camus insisted that in a world without transcendent meaning, the only viable ethic is one built from human beings themselves; their choices, their attention, their stubborn refusal to abandon one another. Decency is not a grand virtue; it is a practice. It is the daily, unglamorous work of care in a universe that neither notices nor rewards it.

These stories explore that ethic through characters who act not because the world demands it, but because they choose to. Their gestures are small; a wrapped crucifix, a held hand, a surgeon's steady skill, a harbour man's quiet listening; yet each becomes a form of revolt. In the silence of an indifferent universe, these acts speak.

Stories in this part:

*The Crucifix: Decency as a Gift*

Thomas keeps the crucifix not for God but for Sister Bridget, whose kindness; "a small wooden cross she had bought herself and carried through a blessing and wrapped in blue cloth"; becomes a symbol of human care freely given. The story reframes meaning as something created between people rather than bestowed from above. It suggests that decency, precisely because it is unnecessary, is the most extraordinary thing we do.

*The Ward: Decency as Labour*

In the sealed world of St. Margaret's, heroism is replaced by persistence: washing hands, checking observations, holding a frightened patient's hand because no one else can. Sarah's recognition that "the only way to fight the plague was decency" echoes Camus's belief that resistance is built from repeated, compassionate acts. The story honours the quiet, relentless labour of those who refuse to let suffering have the final word.

*The Surgeon's Hands: Decency as Craft*

Raymond's survival is not a miracle but the result of Mr. Okafor's skill, patience, and refusal to dramatize his own role. His simple statement; "I just arranged the conditions", becomes a philosophical stance: meaning arises from human craft, not cosmic intervention. The story celebrates the dignity of work done attentively, without illusion or self-importance.

*The Harbour Man: Decency as Burden and Boundary*

Thomas absorbs the emotional weather of others, becoming a still point in a turbulent world. His insight that "the harbour does not choose its boats" captures the tension between compassion and self-erasure. The story suggests that decency is not limitless; it requires honesty about what can be carried and what must be set down.

This part deepens the philosophical arc of the book. After showing the absurd in its everyday forms, the book now turns to the human response: not despair, not transcendence, but decency. Together, these stories articulate a Camusian ethic: in a world without inherent meaning, the most honest thing we can do is care for one another anyway.

## The Crucifix: Decency As a Gift

Sister Bridget had given him the cross on a Tuesday, which was, as far as Thomas could tell, an ordinary day in every other respect. He was eleven, and small for it, and had been sent to her classroom that morning for talking during assembly; a crime he considered minor and the school considered evidence of deeper moral failing. He had expected detention. He had not expected to leave forty minutes later carrying a small wooden crucifix wrapped in a square of blue cloth, with instructions to take it to Father Hennessy at the presbytery for blessing.

"Why me?" he had asked, genuinely puzzled.
Sister Bridget had looked at him with the particular patience of someone who has answered questions like this for thirty years and found them, every one, worth answering. "Because you were here," she said simply. "And because I think you have careful hands."
He had looked at his hands. They did not look especially careful to him. They looked like hands.
But he took the crucifix.

Father Hennessy's presbytery smelled of old paper and something Thomas couldn't name; a specific, churchy smell that seemed to come from the walls themselves, as though the building had absorbed decades of incense and prayer and was slowly releasing them back into the air. The priest was a large, unhurried man who took the crucifix without ceremony, held it for a moment with his eyes closed, said several words in Latin that Thomas didn't catch, and handed it back.

"There," he said.

Thomas had expected something more. A light, perhaps, or a warmth in the wood, some perceptible difference that would tell him the object had been changed by the transaction. But the crucifix felt exactly as it had before; smooth, cool, a little lighter than he'd expected, smelling faintly of whatever wood it was made from.

He carried it back to Sister Bridget, who received it with both hands and a small bow of her head, and that, he assumed, was that. On his birthday in March, she gave it back.

She appeared at the classroom door during geography, asked for Thomas in the particular quiet way that made twenty-three children simultaneously grateful not to be him, and then pressed the blue cloth package into his hands in the corridor and wished him many happy returns with a smile so unguarded that it seemed briefly to belong to someone much younger than her years.
"It's yours," she said. "It always was, really."
He thanked her. He meant it. He carried the crucifix home in his school bag between a football magazine and a half-eaten cereal bar, and placed it on the windowsill of his bedroom, where it stood for the next several years, gathering the particular dust of windowsills.

The doubt came later, the way most honest things come; not suddenly, not as a crisis, but as a slow adjustment of the eyes. He was perhaps sixteen when he first noticed it: a loosening in the framework, a gap between what the words said and what he could actually find when he looked for it. By eighteen the gap had widened considerably. By twenty-two he had stopped going to mass, not in anger but in the quiet way of someone who has simply stopped being able to perform a belief he no longer held, and found the performance more dishonest than the absence.

He did not feel liberated, exactly. He had expected liberation and found instead a kind of openness; neither comforting nor distressing, just wide. The universe, it turned out, did not reorganise itself around his conclusions. It continued as before, indifferent and vast and not particularly interested in whether Thomas believed in it or not.

He kept the crucifix.

This puzzled him, when he thought about it. He was not sentimental as a rule. He had thrown away football trophies and school photographs without difficulty. But the crucifix stayed on the windowsill through three house moves, outlasting furniture and relationships and a great deal else, until it sat on the sill of his flat at thirty-four the same way it had always sat; smooth, cool, faintly smelling of old wood.

He thought about it sometimes. What it meant that he kept it. The universe, Camus had written; or so Thomas had read, in one of the phases of reading that follow the loss of faith the way rehabilitation follows surgery offers no answers. It is silent on the question of meaning. The silence is not hostile. It is simply silence, the way a wall is simply a wall. The tragedy, if it was a tragedy, was not that the universe was cruel. It was that it was nothing of the sort. It was indifferent, which was altogether harder to argue with.

Thomas had found this thought not depressing but clarifying. Like being told the magician's method; disappointing for a moment, and then, surprisingly, more interesting than the trick.

But there was something that didn't quite fit into the framework. Something small and persistent that he couldn't locate in the philosophical architecture, that kept turning up the way the crucifix kept turning up, refusing to be stored away.

Sister Bridget's face in the corridor. The specific quality of her smile. Not God's love, transmitted through a symbol. Not the metaphysics of blessing or the ritual logic of the presbytery. Just a woman who had noticed a boy with careful hands and decided, for no reason the universe required of her, to mark his birthday with a small wooden cross she had bought herself and carried through a blessing and wrapped in blue cloth and waited to give. That was all. That was exactly all.
And yet.

He picked the crucifix up one evening without particularly meaning to, and turned it in his hands. The wood was warmer than he remembered. Or perhaps his hands were colder; it was November, and the flat was draughty. He couldn't say which.

He did not pray. He had nothing to pray to, and honesty mattered more to him now than comfort. But he thought about her. About the corridor. About the way some people, inside a universe that asks nothing of them and rewards nothing they do, decide anyway to be careful with other people. Decide anyway to notice. To wrap things in blue cloth. To appear at classroom doors bearing small, considered gifts for children who talked during assembly and were sent, arbitrarily, to the right room on the right morning. Not grace descending. Something rarer, possibly. Something that required more from the giver because nothing required it at all.

He set the crucifix back on the windowsill.

Outside, November continued; dark at four o'clock, leaves done, the city going about its vast indifferent business under a sky that said nothing and promised nothing and never had. Inside, the crucifix stood. Not a symbol of God, not anymore. A symbol of Sister Bridget, which meant: a symbol of the fact that human beings, tiny and brief and unasked, sometimes choose to be good to one another in the middle of all that silence.

Thomas thought that was the more extraordinary claim, really. He made a cup of tea and stood at the window and watched the street for a while, and felt something he couldn't quite name; not faith, not its opposite, but something that lived in the space between, quiet and stubborn and somehow enough.

## The Ward: Decency as Labour

Dr. Sarah Ainsley had stopped counting the days somewhere around week six. Not because she'd lost track; she could have told you the date if asked, but because counting implied an endpoint, and the ward had taught her that endpoints were a kind of fiction the mind told itself to keep going.

The respiratory ward at St. Margaret's had become its own small country, sealed off by doors marked with red biohazard signs, by gowns and visors and the particular silence of people breathing through machines. Outside, the city went on in its strange suspended way; empty streets, rainbow drawings taped to windows, the Thursday clapping that Sarah had stopped hearing weeks ago because she was always working through it.

She thought sometimes of the plague books she'd read at university, back when illness was a metaphor rather than a Tuesday. She remembered one detail that had stayed with her: how the characters in that story hadn't been heroes in any grand sense. They'd simply kept doing the work. Counting the dead, recording statistics, administering what treatments existed, because the alternative; to stop, to declare it meaningless, wasn't really an alternative at all. It was just death by different means.

Bed fourteen was a retired postman named Trevor. He'd been on the ward for nine days, and this morning his oxygen saturation had dropped again despite the increased flow. Sarah sat with him for ten minutes; long, by the ward's brutal arithmetic, holding his hand through two layers of glove, because his wife couldn't be there to do it, because the iPad propped on the bedside table had a flat battery and nobody had noticed until now.

"Am I going to be alright, doctor?" he asked, and his voice had the particular thinness of someone whose lungs were filling like a tide coming in. "We're doing everything we can, Trevor," she said, which was true, and also not an answer, and they both knew it.

There was no cosmic significance to any of this. That was the thing Sarah had come to understand, somewhere in the long nights of proning patients and watching numbers on monitors. The virus didn't care about Trevor's forty years walking the same postal round, didn't care about the grandchildren he talked about, didn't care about anything at all. It simply replicated, indifferent, the way weather is indifferent, the way the sea is indifferent. And yet.

And yet here was Mei, the nurse on nights, who'd been redeployed from outpatient dermatology three months ago and had cried in the sluice room exactly twice that Sarah knew of, and had shown up for every single shift regardless. Here was the porter, Dennis, who'd started leaving handwritten notes of encouragement clipped to patients' charts; small, slightly absurd messages like you're doing brilliantly and the daffodils are out because he'd decided, apparently unilaterally, that this was something he could do. Here was the whole creaking, exhausted apparatus of the ward, continuing.

Sarah had read once that the only way to fight the plague was decency; not heroism, not faith, just the plain unglamorous decision to keep showing up. To wash the hands, check the obs, hold the hand, fill in the chart, go home, sleep four hours, come back. None of it would stop the virus. None of it would give Trevor's illness meaning, or make sense of why some patients walked out after three days and others, younger and fitter, did not.

But it was something. It was the boulder pushed up the hill again, every single day, not because the hill would ever be conquered but because the pushing itself; done with attention, done with care, was a kind of answer to the silence. Not a victory. Just a refusal to let the silence be the only thing in the room.

At 4pm, Trevor's oxygen requirements stabilised. Not better but not worse. Sarah noted it on his chart, told the nursing staff, and moved to bed fifteen, where a woman named Pat was due her physio session and was frightened of being moved.

Outside, the light was beginning to fail, turning the windows of St. Margaret's amber, then grey. Inside, the ward continued, breath by breath, exactly as it had yesterday, exactly as it would tomorrow; not waiting for the plague to end, because waiting was a luxury nobody on the ward could afford, but simply doing, today, what could be done today.

It would have to be enough. It was the only thing that ever was.

## The Surgeon's Hands: Decency as Craft

The morning after they told Raymond he would live, he didn't know what to do with himself. He lay in the adjustable bed and looked at the ceiling tiles; the particular white of NHS ceilings, that institutional non-colour that belongs to no one and says nothing and waited to feel something appropriate. Gratitude, perhaps. Wonder. The warmth of a man who has been given his life back and knows it. What he felt instead was a strange, flat quiet.

The surgery had been eight hours. He knew this only because people kept telling him, with a reverence in their voices that suggested the number was itself a kind of miracle. Eight hours. As if time, during those eight hours, had been holding its breath. As if the universe had paused its indifference for the duration and leaned in, watching.

Raymond didn't remember any of it. One moment there was the ceiling of the anaesthetic room, a masked face telling him to count, a coldness moving up his arm. Then there was this ceiling. Different room, same white. Eight hours of his life simply absent, unrecorded, as though they had happened to someone else or to no one at all.

His wife Sandra had been in the family room the whole time. She told him she had prayed. She said it carefully, watching his face, knowing his feelings on the matter. She had prayed to God, to whatever God there might be, because when the alternative is sitting in a plastic chair in a corridor while your husband's chest is open on a table somewhere, you reach for whatever is reachable. Raymond squeezed her hand and said nothing.

The surgeon came on the third morning. Mr. Okafor. He was a compact, unhurried man who moved through the ward with the particular stillness of someone who had operated at three in the morning too many times to be impressed by his own authority. He read Raymond's chart. He pressed two fingers below Raymond's ribs. He asked about pain, about appetite, about whether Raymond had managed to walk to the end of the corridor yet.

"You saved my life," Raymond said. It came out more abruptly than he intended. Mr. Okafor looked at him without drama. "Your heart saved your life," he said. "It kept going when it had every reason not to. I just arranged the conditions." He made a small note on the chart and moved to the next bed. Raymond lay still for a long time after that.

He had been a religious man once; not fervently, but in the comfortable background way of someone who found churches peaceful and liked the idea of order behind things. He had believed, loosely, in a God who held the large ledger. Who gave and took. Who breathed life into the particular and called it home when the time came.

But lying here, in the afterwards of his own survival, he found that framework didn't quite fit anymore. Not because he'd been through suffering; suffering, he knew, was supposed to strengthen faith, and plenty of people emerged from operating theatres more certain of God than ever. It was something else. Something about the ordinariness of it.

Mr. Okafor had trained for twenty-three years. He had stood for eight hours. His hands had done specific, learned, practised things; things that could be diagrammed and taught and improved upon, things that had been refined over decades by other pairs of hands before his. There was no mystery in it, not really. There was only knowledge, accumulated slowly, applied with tremendous care. And Raymond was alive.

That was the thing that kept returning to him: not the miracle of it, but the sheer ordinary human fact of it. A man had learned things. A man had stood in a cold room and used those things. And now Raymond could feel the weight of the blanket on his feet and hear the breakfast trolley coming down the corridor and would, the physiotherapist had told him, be walking in the garden by next week.

No ledger. No decree. No divine hand moving through the incision. Just Mr. Okafor, who would go home tonight to wherever he lived and eat dinner and perhaps sleep badly because that was the kind of thing that happened to people who held other people's lives in their hands for eight hours and felt the full weight of that, even when they didn't show it.

Sandra brought him a card on the fifth day, from the grandchildren. On the front was a drawing by his grandson, age six, of a man in a green mask with enormous hands and a red cross on his chest, standing over a smaller figure in a bed. Above it, in careful letters that someone older had helped with:

*THE MAN WHO FIXED GRANDAD*

Raymond looked at it for a long time. He thought about God and about what God meant; about whether the word was a name or a direction, a being or a gesture toward something that humans require and cannot stop reaching for. He thought about Mr. Okafor going home tonight. He thought about Sandra in the plastic chair for eight hours, reaching for something to hold.

None of them, he thought, had been wrong exactly. Sandra reaching upward. Mr. Okafor reaching inward, into his years of knowledge. His grandson reaching for the closest thing to a god he could draw with a crayon. All of them, in their different ways, refusing to let the silence be the only answer.

That, perhaps, was what it meant to be alive in a world that offered no guarantees. Not faith, exactly, and not its absence either, but the reaching itself. The refusal to stop. The eight hours of standing. The plastic chair. The crayon god with enormous hands.

Raymond folded the card carefully and put it on the bedside table, beside the water jug and the book Sandra had brought that he hadn't read. Outside the window, the car park stretched grey and ordinary into a grey and ordinary morning. A pigeon landed on a concrete bollard and looked at nothing.

Raymond thought: I am here. I am still here. It was not an answer. It was better than an answer. It was a fact - bare, unglamorous, entirely his own and he held it the way you hold something you nearly lost, which is to say: with both hands, loosely, knowing it will not last forever, grateful beyond all reason for today.

## The Harbour Man: Decency as Burden and Boundary

Everyone in the village said that Thomas was the still one. They said it as a compliment, which it was, and also as a convenience, which it also was. When Mireille's husband left without explanation, she came to Thomas's kitchen and sat for two hours while he made tea and listened. When old Fernand's son stopped calling, Fernand came to the garden wall and talked until the light went, and Thomas leaned on his side of it and nodded and did not offer solutions, which was precisely why Fernand kept coming back. When the young teacher from the école primaire; new to the village, overwhelmed by it, passed Thomas on the street with a look of barely contained drowning, he somehow found himself sitting in Thomas's front room twenty minutes later. He was unsure how he had arrived there, grateful beyond his ability to say so.

Thomas accepted all of it. This was understood. Thomas was the harbour. The harbour does not choose its boats.

What was not understood, what Thomas had never offered for understanding, was what happened after they left. The door would close. The kitchen or the garden or the front room would return to its silence. And Thomas would sit in that silence and find it populated. Not empty. *Populated* by the residue of everything that had been brought to him and set down, like luggage left in a hallway by guests who had gone home travelling light.

Mireille's particular shade of abandonment. The specific texture of Fernand's loneliness, which had a quality of something calcified, grief turned slowly to stone over years. The young teacher's bewilderment, which was fresher, rawer, a still-open thing. Thomas breathed these in. He did not mean to. He simply did, the way a room absorbs the smell of everything cooked in it. He would sit with what remained, in the quiet that was not, for him, ever entirely quiet, and he would feel the pulse of other people's unrest beneath his own sternum like a second heartbeat, arrhythmic, uninvited, entirely real.

This was not, he had long understood, his anxiety. But it lived in him anyway, which amounted to the same thing.

He had read Camus once, in his twenties, sitting in a square in Marseille with a coffee he'd made last an hour. He had not read him carefully; he was twenty-three and reading carefully was something he assumed he'd get around to. One idea had lodged itself and remained; the way a particular stone remains in a shoe long after you've forgotten walking on it. The idea was this: that the absurd arises not from the world alone, nor from the person alone, but from the *confrontation* between them. The human being arrives with needs for meaning, for coherence, for the world to make a certain kind of sense and the world receives these needs in silence. The silence is not hostile. It is simply silence. And in the gap between what is needed and what is given, the absurd lives. Thomas thought about this now, on a Tuesday evening in October, the village going dark outside his window.

He had needs too. Simple ones, mostly. Stillness. The particular quality of early morning before anyone needed anything. The unremarkable pleasure of his own thoughts, unoccupied by the thoughts of others. What he received, consistently, was the world's other people. He did not resent this. That was the thing he had never quite been able to explain, on the rare occasions it had required explaining. He did not resent the boats that came to the harbour. The harbour does not resent the sea for being the sea.

But the harbour, Thomas had come to understand, is also not the sea. The harbour has its own conditions. Its own depth. Its own darkness under the water, where the anchors drag bottom and the weeds grow in the absence of light.

Fernand came on Wednesday, as he usually did.

They stood at the garden wall in the grey afternoon, and Fernand talked about his son; the same waters, navigated again, slightly different currents. Thomas listened with the full attention he had always given, which was not performance but genuine orientation, the way a plant turns toward whatever light is available. When Fernand left, Thomas remained at the wall for a while. The village was doing its quiet evening things. Smoke from chimneys. A child called in for dinner by a voice from an upstairs window. The church bell, which had been slightly wrong for thirty years and nobody had fixed.

Thomas breathed. He was, he thought, a man carrying weather that had started in other people's skies. This was true. It was also true that he had chosen nothing else, that the harbour had not been assigned to him but had simply *emerged*, the way certain things emerge from character without consultation. He was this. The question was not whether to be otherwise.

The question; Camus's question, really, the one that refused to stay in the square in Marseille where he'd first encountered it, was whether a man could carry borrowed weight and still be free.

He thought, standing at the garden wall as the light failed, that perhaps freedom was not the absence of what you carry. Perhaps it was the *knowledge* that you are the one carrying it. That the weight is real, and you are real, and the silence of the world around you is real, and none of these facts cancels any other.

He was a calm man. This was true. He was a calm man full of other people's weather. This was also true. Both things stood together in the garden in the October dark, without resolution, without apology. He found, in this, something he could only call honest. He went inside. He put the kettle on. Tomorrow, someone else would come. The harbour would be ready. It always was.

# PART 3

# AUTONOMY, REBELLION, AND THE REFUSAL TO DANCE

Rebellion, in the Camusian sense, is not violence or spectacle. It is the quiet, stubborn refusal to participate in illusions; the decision to stand still when the world demands choreography. Autonomy becomes a form of revolt: a declaration that one's inner life is not a public utility, not a resource to be mined by employers, families, or social expectations.

The stories in this part explore characters who decline to perform the roles assigned to them. Their rebellions are small, almost invisible from the outside, yet they carry immense existential weight. Each character chooses honesty over compliance, stillness over orchestration, selfhood over the comfort of being understood.

The stories that follow examine the moments when a person simply says: No. Not this. Not for you. The titles are:

*Not Every Song Deserves a Dance: Rebellion as Authenticity*

Étienne's lifelong habit of choreographing others collapses when he encounters Marcellin's serene refusal to be moved. Marcellin's insight; "I'm just not governed", becomes a philosophical stance, a rejection of ambition as performance. The story reveals autonomy as a quiet, radical act: the freedom to decline the music entirely.

*The Crown of Me: Rebellion as Self-definition*

Jethro's paper crown teaches him that authority is a performance sustained only by others' belief. When the universe remains unmoved, his mother simply puts the crusts on his plate. He discovers that dignity lies not in being seen but in being. The story becomes a child-sized parable about the limits of power and the liberation of stepping outside the script.

*The Other Side: Rebellion as Authenticity*

An interview table becomes a stage for the absurd confrontation between authenticity and expectation. The narrator's refusal to perform; "I am what I am, and this is not a problem I am willing to solve for you", is a quiet act of revolt. The story affirms that freedom lies not in crossing the canyon but in declining to pretend it isn't there.

This part marks a philosophical pivot. After exploring the absurd and then the ethic of decency, the book now turns to rebellion; the moment when a person asserts their own boundaries against the world's demands. Together, these stories articulate a Camusian truth: Revolt begins when a person stops dancing to someone else's rhythm.

## Not every song deserves a dance: Rebellion as Authenticity

Étienne Roussel had spent eleven years choreographing other people's lives. It started small; a suggestion here, a nudge there. He told his brother which university to attend, his sister which man to marry, his employees which projects deserved their weekends. He did not see himself as a tyrant. He saw himself as a conductor, and the world, gratefully, as his orchestra.

The trouble began with Marcellin. Marcellin worked in the print shop on Rue de la Liberté, a quiet man with ink-stained fingers and eyes that seemed to be perpetually elsewhere; not dreaming, exactly, but elsewhere, as if he were watching some other version of the street unfold in a parallel city. Étienne had hired him three years ago and had since attempted, with mounting frustration, to shape him into something useful. Promotions dangled. Threats implied. A whole symphony of incentives composed and performed for an audience of one. Marcellin remained unmoved.

“I don’t understand you,” Étienne said one afternoon, standing in the doorway of the small workshop, watching Marcellin set type with the patient rhythm of a man who had nowhere else to be and nowhere else he wanted to go. “I offer you the foreman’s position. Better pay. Authority. And you say no. Why?” Marcellin didn’t look up. “Because I don’t want it.” “Everyone wants more.”

“Do they?” Marcellin set another letter into the frame, unhurried. “Or do they want to seem like they want more, because wanting nothing frightens people?” Étienne laughed, but it came out thin. “That’s absurd.” “Yes,” Marcellin agreed, and smiled for the first time that day. “It is.”

That night, Étienne sat in his apartment overlooking the harbour, a glass of pastis sweating on the table beside him, and found that he could not stop thinking about the exchange. It bothered him in a way he couldn't articulate; not because Marcellin had defied him, exactly, but because the defiance carried no weight, no struggle, no friction at all. Marcellin hadn't fought him. He had simply continued being Marcellin, the way a stone continues being a stone regardless of the tide.

Étienne had read his Camus in university, the way educated men of his generation did; dutifully, performatively, filing The Myth of Sisyphus somewhere between Sartre and a half-remembered crush on a literature student. He recalled, now, the central image: the boulder, the hill, the eternal repetition. He had always understood it as a story about futility. About a man condemned to meaninglessness. But sitting there, glass sweating, harbour lights blurring into the dark water, he wondered if he'd had it backward.

Sisyphus wasn't condemned to push the boulder. He was condemned to care whether it stayed at the top. The pushing was just labour. The suffering came from the wanting; from believing the boulder's position meant something, that the universe owed him a permanent summit, that effort deserved a lasting reward. Camus's revolution wasn't in the climbing. It was in the moment Sisyphus walked back down the hill, knowing the boulder would roll again, and felt nothing but the sun on his face.

Marcellin had found that moment and, simply, lived in it. Permanently. He had stepped outside the choreography entirely; not by rebelling against the music, which would have meant acknowledging its authority, but by realising he had never been required to dance at all.

Étienne returned to the print shop three days later, not as an employer this time, but as something closer to a supplicant, though he would not have used that word.

"The foreman position," he said. "Forget it. I want to understand something else. How do you do it? How do you just… not care?"

Marcellin set down the composing stick. For the first time, he gave Étienne his full attention, and there was no triumph in it, no smugness; only a kind of weary kindness, the look of a man explaining something he wished didn't need explaining.

"You're asking the wrong question," he said. "I care about plenty of things. I care about my daughter. I care about good bread and bad coffee and whether it rains on Sunday, because I like walking without an umbrella. What I don't care about is your foreman's position, or your promotions, or the rhythm you've built your whole life around; the one where everything must lead somewhere, prove something, accumulate into a shape you can point to and call a life well-spent."

"And if it doesn't accumulate? If there's no shape at all?"

"Then there's no shape. The sky doesn't stop being blue because no one's painted it."

Étienne sat down on an overturned crate, suddenly very tired. "But you must want something."

"I want the things in front of me. This page. This light coming through that window; look at it, it's good light, isn't it? My daughter's laugh. I'm not indifferent, Monsieur Roussel. I'm just not governed. There's a difference between a man who's given up and a man who's simply stopped waiting for permission to be satisfied."

Walking home that evening, Étienne found himself taking the long way, down toward the harbour, where the fishing boats knocked gently against the dock in a rhythm that belonged to no one; not the tide's command, not any composer's intention, just water and wood and the patient arithmetic of physics.

He thought about all the music he had spent his life conducting. The promotions he had engineered, the marriages he had nudged into being, the careful architecture of obligation he had built around everyone he loved, believing it was a gift. He had thought himself generous. He had thought the dance he offered was a kind of grace.

But Marcellin had simply stood still. Not in defiance; defiance would have required Étienne's music to matter. He had stood still the way a stone stands in a stream, without strain, without rebellion, simply being what it was while the current rearranged itself around an obstacle that had never asked to be moved.

The boulder would roll down again tomorrow. Étienne understood that now; not as tragedy, but as the plainest fact in the world. The only question that remained, the only one that had ever mattered, was what a man did with the walk back down.

He stopped at the railing and watched the boats a while longer, in no hurry at all.

## The Crown of Me: Rebellion as Self-definition

The morning Jethro declared himself King, he did so with a paper crown. He had made it himself from the back of a cereal box; gold crayon on brown cardboard, the word KING OF ME printed in large, uneven capitals across the front. He placed it on his head at the breakfast table with the solemnity of a coronation, adjusted it once, and then looked around the kitchen for acknowledgement.

His mother was making coffee. She did not look up. This was the first problem with being King. Jethro was six years old, which meant he understood power the way most people understand it; as something that must be seen to exist. He had watched enough of the right programmes to know that kings sat on thrones, spoke in loud voices, and were obeyed without question. He had the crown. He had the voice. He had arranged his expression into what he considered a suitably regal severity.

"I am the King," he announced, to nobody in particular, to everybody in general. "That's nice," said his mother, and poured her coffee.

She was not being unkind. She was being something worse, from Jethro's perspective: she was being indifferent. And the universe, Jethro was beginning to discover, was extraordinarily good at indifference. It had been practicing since long before he arrived, and it had no intention of adjusting its habits for a paper crown.

He tried again at lunch. He stood at the head of the table; or what he had decided was the head of the table, repositioning himself slightly to make this true and declared that as King, he would not be eating the crusts. The crusts were beneath his station. The crusts were, he felt, a culinary transgression against the dignity of the throne.

His mother put the crusts on his plate and sat down. "The King," Jethro said carefully, "does not eat crusts." "Jethro," his mother said, "eats his crusts."

This was the problem with mothers, he was finding. They refused to recognise the role. And without recognition, he was beginning to dimly sense, the crown was just cardboard. The gestures were just gestures. The authority was just a claim, floating in the air, waiting for someone to believe it. He ate the crusts. He kept the crown on. A king did not surrender symbols simply because the universe was uncooperative.

It was later, in the garden, that something shifted. He had been sitting on the back step for some time, crown slightly askew, watching a beetle make its way across the paving stones with extraordinary singleness of purpose. The beetle was going somewhere. It was impossible to say where. It didn't stop to explain itself or seek permission or perform its beetle-ness for an audience. It simply went. Jethro watched it for a long time.

He thought about the crown. He thought about the word KING printed on it, and about how the word was supposed to make something happen; was supposed to reorganise the kitchen, and the lunch, and the crusts, and his mother's face, and about how it had done none of these things. The universe had continued exactly as before. The coffee had been made. The crusts had appeared. The beetle moved.

Something about this was clarifying rather than defeating. He took the crown off and looked at it. Brown cardboard. Gold crayon. His own handwriting, slightly smudged. A prop, he understood now, without quite having the word for it. A piece of theatre he had constructed and then stood inside, waiting for the world to become his audience.

But the world was not an audience. The world was the beetle and the paving stones and the coffee going cold on the kitchen counter and his mother, who knew things about custard and crusts and the particular texture of things that couldn't be commanded into being different by a boy in a paper crown.

He didn't feel defeated exactly. He felt something harder to name; something like the beginning of a thought that wouldn't finish itself for many years, that would come back to him in different forms in different kitchens, in offices and meeting rooms and public squares where other people wore other crowns and spoke in loud voices and arranged their faces for audiences sitting just beyond the frame.

The thought was simply this: the crown was never the thing. The thing was what you did when you took the crown off. What remained when the performance ended. Whether, in the silence after the gestures and the symbols and the rehearsed expressions, there was anything actually there.

He put the crown back on. He was six, after all, and a king has appearances to maintain. But he watched the beetle all the way to the wall. And he found, in that small, indifferent, purposeful creature going about its business without ceremony or crown or audience, something that felt more like dignity than anything he'd managed all morning.

The beetle didn't need to be seen. It simply was. And in a universe that offered no thrones and no guarantees and no applause, that turned out to be enough.

## The Other Side: Rebellion as Authenticity

The table was not large. Perhaps a metre and a half of pale wood, a water jug, two glasses, a potted succulent that had seen better days. And yet it might as well have been a canyon, or an ocean, or one of those vast Algerian stretches of land that go on until the sky simply gives up and becomes the earth. I sat on one side of it. They sat on the other.

There were two of them. A woman with reading glasses pushed up into her hair like a forgotten afterthought, and a man whose tie suggested he had dressed for an occasion more serious than this one, or possibly less. They had folders. They had printed my name at the top of a page, which I found both flattering and faintly sinister. They smiled. I smiled. The succulent did not smile, but it had the decency to remain neutral.

*"Tell us,"* said the woman, *"about yourself."*

And there it was. The opening. The invitation across the canyon. I recognised it for what it was: not a question at all, but a key turned in a lock; an expectation that I would open like a door, swing wide, reveal a well-lit interior arranged for easy viewing. A self, curated. A narrative, reversed-engineered to fit the space they had prepared for it. I considered the water jug. It was half full, or half empty, depending on your philosophy, which suddenly seemed relevant.

I had read once; or perhaps been told, or perhaps simply arrived at by the long route of living, that the absurd is what happens when a human being walks into a room full of people who have already decided what a human being should look like. The world does not answer our deepest questions. It simply presents us with its expectations, dressed in business casual, and waits.

The man leaned forward slightly. *"We're wondering,"* he said, *"whether you'd be comfortable adapting to a more,"* he searched the air for a word, and found one that had clearly been used before, *"dynamic approach."*

*Dynamic.* I turned it over like a coin of uncertain currency. What they meant, I understood, was: *be other than you are.* Be louder, be quicker, perform the enthusiasm of a man who has never once sat in a garden and watched an afternoon pass without requiring it to mean something. Construct, for our convenience, a version of yourself that fits the confines we have already drawn in pencil, lightly, so we can later say we never drew them at all.

I felt, in my chest, something that was not quite anger and not quite amusement. Camus might have called it the absurd in its purest form: the collision between what I was and what the room required me to be. Not tragedy. Not comedy. Something stranger and more honest than either.

*"I'm comfortable,"* I said, *"with being effective."*

It was not the answer they had expected. I could see this in the small recalibration that passed between them, quick as weather.

Within my stillness; and I was still, I am always still, in the way that deep water is still, something had been gathering since the moment I sat down. Not rebellion, exactly. Rebellion implies that there is an authority worth overthrowing, and I had long since stopped granting that authority. What gathered in me was quieter and more permanent than rebellion. It was simply: *I am what I am, and this is not a problem I am willing to solve for you.*

They spoke of careers as though careers were rivers with a single current, and you were either swimming in the right direction or you were drowning or you were in the wrong river entirely. They constructed, from the materials of my silence and my stillness and my failure to perform, a version of me that was a question to be answered, a deficiency to be addressed, a gap to be bridged.

I thought of Sisyphus. I thought of him not with despair but with a kind of companionship. He too had faced a structure that made demands. He too had pushed against something that did not yield. And Camus had said; and I believed him, sitting there across the pale wood table, that we must imagine Sisyphus happy. Not because the boulder relents. Not because the hill flattens. But because Sisyphus *is the boulder's equal*, and he knows it, and that knowledge is a form of freedom that no table and no folder and no man with a serious tie can take from a person.

I did not push the boulder up the hill for them. I sat beside it, in the sunshine of my own nature, and I was entirely calm.

The interview ended as these things end - pleasantries exchanged like hostages, goodbyes offered with the warmth of people who have not quite met. I shook hands across the table. The canyon remained. Neither of us had crossed it. I was not sure either of us had tried.

Outside, the afternoon was doing what afternoons do: simply being there, unhurried, without agenda. I walked into it.

The significance, I thought; and it was not a bitter thought, not a defeated one, but something closer to clear-eyed and light, the significance was never in the performance. Never in the reversal of the narrative, the bridging of the gap, the dynamic approach. The significance was in the depth, in the truth that runs underneath the table and the folders and the expectations like a river running underneath stone.
It does not ask permission. It does not bridge anything. It simply goes on. As do I.

# PART 4
# WORK, DUTY, AND THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

Work is one of the most honest encounters with the absurd. It repeats. It demands. It rarely resolves. Whether the labour is physical, emotional, or moral, it places a weight on the individual - a weight that must be carried without promise of reward or recognition. Camus understood this intimately: Sisyphus is not punished by the boulder; he is defined by the pushing. These stories explore characters who meet the world through their work, discovering in the repetition a kind of clarity. Their duties do not grant meaning, but they create shape. Their burdens do not redeem them, but they reveal who they are when no one is watching. In these pieces, labour becomes a form of revolt: the decision to continue, even when continuation is the only thing left.

The story in this part is, *Ten Miles with the Key: Work as Identity and Illusion.*

Reed's imprisonment in his own police station becomes an unexpected confrontation with the absurdity of professional identity. His realisation that "the world… did not organize itself around Detective Constable Reed" frees him from the illusion of indispensability. The story exposes the quiet comedy of duty and the relief that comes when the self is no longer propped up by its job.

*The Ward,* though placed earlier in the part on decency, also belongs here too: The Ward is a workplace where duty becomes a form of endurance. Sarah's labour; washing hands, checking observations, holding hands; is Sisyphean in its repetition and its refusal to yield to despair. The story shows work as a moral stance: not heroic, not transcendent, but necessary.

*The Harbour Man*, also placed earlier, also belongs here. Thomas's emotional labour; absorbing the storms of others becomes its own kind of work, unchosen yet persistent. His insight that "the harbour does not choose its boats" captures the burden of being the still point for others. The story reveals the cost of carrying what is not yours, and the honesty required to set limits.

This part of the book deepens the philosophical arc by grounding the abstract ideas of absurdity, decency, and rebellion in the physical and emotional realities of labour. Together, these stories articulate a Camusian truth that we push the boulder not because it will reach the top, but because pushing is what remains to us.

## Ten Miles with the Key: Work as Identity and Illusion

The handcuffs had been a joke, originally. Everyone in CID agreed on that point, afterward, when the Chief Inspector demanded statements and the office filled with the particular hush that follows something nobody quite knows how to categorize.

"It was a joke," DS Liddy kept saying, as if repetition might retroactively make it true. "Reed and I, we rib each other constantly. You know this."

What nobody could explain; not Liddy, not the desk sergeant, not the two uniformed constables who'd watched it happen and done nothing, because what do you do when a senior detective handcuffs a junior one to a radiator pipe with theatrical solemnity and says, "You're not coming, Reed, you talk too much at scenes"; was why Liddy had then walked out of the station, got into his car, driven ten miles to a reported burglary on the Hexham Road, conducted a full forty-minute scene examination, and driven back.

With the key in his pocket the entire time.

Detective Constable Reed had not panicked, not exactly. He'd shouted for the first twenty minutes, which achieved nothing except annoying DC Pemberton, who was on the phone with a witness and kept having to apologize for the noise. After that, Reed had simply sat. The radiator was warm against his back, which was something. His coffee, made twenty minutes before his arrest, sat going cold on the desk eight inches from his free hand, close enough to see the steam stop rising, far enough that it might as well have been on the moon. He thought, in the long quiet that followed, about every report he had ever filed. About the burglary cases stacked on his desk; seventeen of them, this month alone, half of Gateshead apparently having decided that June was the season for relieving their neighbours of laptops and jewellery boxes.

He thought about the scene Liddy was at that moment, examining without him: the pry marks on the back door, the muddy footprint by the flower bed, the particular smell of a house that has been violated and knows it. He thought: I should be there.

And then, somewhere around the half-hour mark, sitting handcuffed to a radiator in an empty CID office with his coffee growing cold and the afternoon light moving slowly across the carpet tiles, Reed thought something else, something that arrived without ceremony, the way true things often do. Should I be there, though?

The case would proceed. It always did. Liddy would write his notes, photograph the pry marks, bag the muddy print for forensics, interview the homeowner, who was an elderly man named Whitfield who'd lost his late wife's wedding ring and would weep about it, briefly, in the kitchen, before apologizing for weeping. The case would be logged, assigned a number, filed among the seventeen others. In six months, it might be solved. More likely it would join the long grey archive of cases that simply continued, neither closed nor abandoned, existing in the administrative equivalent of limbo.

And whether Reed had been present for the scene examination, whether he had crouched by that flower bed and made his own notes - his own small contribution to the great machine, would change nothing about any of this. The machine did not require him specifically. It required a detective, and Liddy, evidently, would do.

This was not despair, Reed found, turning the thought over. It was something stranger and more spacious than despair. For eleven years he had operated under the assumption; never examined, simply inherited, the way one inherits an accent, that his presence mattered. That the cases needed him, that his diligence was load-bearing, that if he did not personally attend every scene, write every statement, chase every loose thread, something essential would go missing from the world.

But the world, it turned out, did not organize itself around Detective Constable Reed. It had pry marks and muddy footprints and weeping widowers regardless of who arrived to document them. The burglary on Hexham Road did not know or care that the second detective was handcuffed to a radiator ten miles away. It simply was, indifferent, complete in itself, waiting to be observed by whoever happened to show up. There was something almost funny about it. Reed found himself laughing; a single, surprised bark of a laugh that echoed oddly in the empty office.

When Liddy returned, sheepish, key already in hand before he'd crossed the threshold, he found Reed not furious, not even particularly annoyed, but sitting with an expression Liddy couldn't quite place. Calm. Almost amused. The coffee, stone cold, still sat untouched on the desk.

"You're not going to report this," Liddy said. It wasn't quite a question.

"No," Reed said, and meant it, though not for the reasons Liddy assumed; not camaraderie, not fear of looking foolish, not the unspoken code that bound CID together against the world. Even though the Chief Inspecter would eventually inadvertently hear about it, Reed wouldn't report it because, turning it over one more time, he found he simply didn't mind. The handcuffs were off now. The afternoon light had moved another foot across the carpet. Somewhere a phone was ringing, and somewhere else a case file was being updated with details that would have been recorded whether he'd been present or not.

Liddy had unlocked the cuffs, made some joke about the burglary; a "proper job," he said, professional, in and out, no fingerprints worth the bother and Reed listened, nodding, rubbing his wrist where the metal had pressed a faint red line into his skin.

That evening, walking to his car, Reed noticed the light differently. Ordinary June light, gold and a little tired, falling across the station car park the way it had fallen across a thousand other evenings he hadn't particularly noticed. He stood by his car for a moment, not because anything had changed, but because; for the first time in longer than he could remember. Nothing needed to.

The cases would continue. The pile on his desk would still be there tomorrow, seventeen burglaries strong, possibly eighteen by morning. None of that had altered in the slightest. But Reed, walking to his car in the gold light, found that he had.

## Afterword: The Silence and the Answer

We live our lives in fragments. A conversation in a kitchen. A shift on a ward. A walk home with a key we did not mean to carry. A gesture of kindness that no one required of us. A refusal to dance to a rhythm we did not choose. These fragments rarely announce themselves as meaningful, yet they accumulate into something like a life - not coherent, not orchestrated, but undeniably ours.

The stories in this book began as small observations about my personal experiences: the way a person stirs custard, the way a child laughs at a dropped ice cream, the way a surgeon shrugs off the word miracle, the way a man sits still while others bring him their storms. None of these moments are grand. None of them solve the absurd. But each of them reveals something about how we move through a world that does not explain itself.

When Camus wrote that the universe is silent he did not mean it cruelly. He meant that the world does not speak our language, does not answer our questions, does not bend itself to our longing for order. And yet, in that silence, human beings continue to act, to care, to rebel, to work, to laugh, to project meaning onto objects that never asked to hold it. We continue to live as though our gestures matter, even when we know they are not recorded in any cosmic ledger. This is not delusion. It is courage.

The characters in these stories are not heroes. They are not prophets or philosophers. They are people who encounter the absurd in the middle of their ordinary days and respond in the only ways available to them: with humour, with decency, with stubborn autonomy, with the weight of their labour, with the meanings they make from the objects they carry. They do not transcend the absurd. They inhabit it.

If there is a thread that binds these stories, it is this: meaning is not something we discover; it is something we practice.

We practice it in the way we speak to one another. In the way we refuse to be governed by expectations that do not fit. In the way we show up for work that will never be finished. In the way we hold a crucifix long after belief has faded, because someone once wrapped it in blue cloth. In the way we notice the world, even when the world does not notice us back.

The absurd is not a problem to be solved. It is a condition to be lived. And living it well; honestly, attentively, without illusion, is its own form of revolt. If these stories offer anything, I hope it is the reminder that the small things matter. That the ordinary is not empty. That decency is a kind of defiance. That autonomy is a quiet flame. That work, even when repetitive, can be dignified. That objects become symbols because we are creatures who cannot help but make symbols. And that in the silence of the universe, our gestures - brief, unasked, unrecorded - are enough.

We push the boulder.
We laugh at the dropped ice cream.
We stir the custard.

We hold the hand.

We refuse the dance.

We begin again.

Not because the world demands it, but because we choose to. And in that choosing, something like meaning appears - not given, not promised, but made.

## About the Author

Michael McManus was born in 1946 in Durham City, UK. He has led a distinguished and varied career, serving for fifty years in Public Service. He served as an Airman in the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm during the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1971, he joined the Durham Constabulary, dedicating nearly three decades to policing before retiring in 1999 and transitioning to academia at Durham University, where he taught Sociology and Criminology in a part-time capacity from 1999 to 2015 and was module leader in the Policing Module and the Researching Crime Module. He has researched the relationship between private policing and public policing in public residential areas. He has written textbooks such as "From Fate to Choice: Private Bobbies, Public Beats" and "The State or the Market? An Evaluation of Private Security Patrol in Public Residential Areas of The United Kingdom. He was awarded a BA (Hons) Degree from New College, Durham and a PhD from Durham University. He holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning from Durham University.

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